

TAKING NOTES FROM RESEARCH READING

Taking notes efficiently is essential to your sanity in facing the current wealth of information available in print and electronic form. It is also a key part of writing well-focussed and coherently argued papers. Good note-taking strategies will help you read with more understanding and also save time and frustration when you write your paper. These are three main principles:

Know what kind of ideas you need to record

Focus your approach to the topic before you start detailed research. Then you will read with a purpose in mind, and you will be able to sort out relevant ideas.

- Analyse the assignment sheet to be clear about just what you are going to do with your topic, and what your topic consists of. (See the handout on Understanding Essay Topics).
- Then review the commonly known facts about your topic, and also become aware of the range of thinking and opinions on it. As well as your class notes and textbook, browse in an encyclopaedia or other reference work.
- Try making a preliminary list of the subtopics you would expect to find in your reading. These will guide your attention and may come in handy as search terms and labels for notes.
- Choose a component or angle that interests you, perhaps one on which there is already some controversy. Now formulate your research question. It should allow for reasoning as well as gathering of information. Not just what the proto-Iroquoians ate, for instance, but how valid the evidence is for early introduction of corn. You may even want to jot down a tentative thesis statement as a preliminary answer to your question. (See the handout *Using Thesis Statements* for the defining characteristics of a good thesis statement.)
- Then you will know what to look for in your research reading: facts and theories that help answer your question, and other people's opinions about the value of specific answers.

Don't write down too much

Your essay must be an expression of your own thinking, not a patchwork of borrowed ideas. Plan therefore to invest your research time in understanding your sources and integrating them into your own thinking. Use your note cards or note sheets to record only ideas that are relevant to your focus on the topic; and summarize rather than copy out or paraphrase.

- Copy out exact words **only** when the ideas are memorably phrased or surprisingly expressed--on the few occasions when you might use them as actual quotations.
- Otherwise, **compress ideas in your own words**. Paraphrasing word by word is a waste of time. Choose the most important ideas and write them down as labels or headings. Then fill in with a few subpoints that explain or exemplify.
- Don't depend on underlining and highlighting. Find your own words for notes in the margin (or on "sticky" notes).

Label your notes intelligently

Whether you use cards or pages for note-taking, take notes in a way that allows for later use.

- Save bother later by **recording bibliographic information** in a master list or computer file when you begin looking at each source (don't forget to note book and journal information for photocopies). Then you can quickly identify each note by the author's name and page number; when you refer to sources in the essay you can fill in details of publication easily from your master list. Keep a format guide handy so you get details right from the start (see the handout on *Documentation Formats*).
- Try as far as possible to put notes on **separate cards or sheets**. This will let you label the topic of each note. Not only will that keep your notetaking focussed, but it will also allow for grouping and synthesizing of ideas later. It is especially satisfying to shuffle notes and see how the conjunctions create new ideas in your own thinking.
- Leave lots of space in your notes for **comments of your own**. Questions and reactions as you read, second thoughts and cross-references when you look back at what you've written. These comments can become a virtual first draft of your paper.